

Passive Elk Traps Aid Efforts To Bolster Herd



Elk graze near one of two passive traps near Mount St. Helens used by Point Elliott treaty Indian tribes as part of a joint effort to supplement the North Cascades elk herd. The traps significantly reduce stress to the captured animals. *Photo: Chris Madsen*

A cooperative effort between the Point Elliott Treaty tribes and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to bolster a weak population of elk in the North Cascades resulted in the successful transfer of four more animals from the Mount St. Helens area this fall. The elk were moved to help augment the flagging Nooksack elk herd, also known as the North Cascades elk herd, while reducing the overpopulated Mount St. Helens herd, which is outstripping its food supply.

“We are pleased with the results of this joint effort,” said Todd Wilbur, Swinomish Tribe, who chairs the Inter-tribal Wildlife Committee of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. “The tribes are committed to enhancing and protecting elk populations throughout western Washington. This project will dramatically improve the health of the North Cascades elk herd.”

Assisted by Mark Smith, president of the Mount St. Helens Preservation Society, the tribes used two passive traps to capture the four cow elk. A larger trapping effort was cancelled due to volcanic activity inside the mountain.

Last year, the tribes and the state worked together using a helicopter to round up 41 animals for transfer. “This project is just one more way the tribes are working to preserve wildlife,” said Scott Schuyler, natural resources policy coordinator with the Upper Skagit Tribe.

The passive corral traps are baited with apples, a favorite elk snack. Once a number of animals have entered the trap to feed, the gated opening is closed by remote control.

“This trap is the least invasive elk capture method people have come up with yet,” said Shawn Yanity, chairman of the Stillaguamish Tribe. “We want to minimize stress on the animals.”

Captured adult cow elk were fitted with radio-transmitting collars before release, which will allow biologists to track their movements and habitat uses. The Point Elliott treaty tribes, working in cooperation with the state co-managers and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation volunteers, will monitor movements of the transplanted elk for the next two years.

The Point Elliott tribes include Lummi, Muckleshoot, Nooksack, Sauk-Suiattle, Stillaguamish, Suquamish, Swinomish, Tulalip and Upper Skagit.

Biologists believe a number of factors contributed to the decline in the North Cascades elk herd’s population, including habitat changes and over-hunting. WDFW and the tribes have forbidden hunting in the herd’s core area since 1993, and hunting seasons for the area will not be established until elk populations have reached a recovery goal. — *J. Shaw*

Quileute Tribe Assists Deer, Elk Disease Research

The Quileute Tribe is collecting brain stem samples from deer and elk harvested by hunters to check for chronic wasting disease in cooperation with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).

Chronic wasting disease affects the neurological system of deer and elk and has required the elimination of entire herds in other states. Quileute tribal technical staff, together with non-Indian volunteers, are asking hunters for permission to remove a sample of deer and elk brain stem tissue along with gathering other harvest information. “This is strictly voluntary,” said Frank Geyer, Timber, Fish and Wildlife biologist for the Quileute Tribe. “But information about harvest and the samples we collect really help with the management of the resource in this area.”

Washington treaty tribes and the State of Washington are co-managers of the fisheries and wildlife resources. Tribal technicians were trained by WDFW veterinarians to remove the brain stem for analysis.

The number of samples collected will dramatically increase with the assistance of Quileute technical staff. “We are working to staff as many different hunter exit roads as possible to get the largest sample size we can,” said Geyer.

Surveying for disease is part of the tribe’s comprehensive game management plan. The tribe has an ongoing study of elk herds in the Forks area to track productivity, food availability and overall herd health.

“Harvest pressure in this area is heavy, so all the information we collect is critical,” said Geyer. The Quileute sampling effort is funded by a grant from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and supported by WDFW. “While the disease has not been detected anywhere within the state, there is a danger in assuming that it does not exist,” said Geyer. “There has been little sampling done on the western Olympic Peninsula. This effort will help fill that data gap.” — *D. Preston*